

RALPH WEHLITZ, MMR #191



On left: Painting of Ralph Wehlitz by Bailey Iwen, presented at his 100th Birthday party 6/6/2024

Ralph Wehlitz was born in Milwaukee in 1924 and grew up in suburban Wauwatosa, WI. As a child he had American Flyer O Gauge models and began constructing accurate models at about age 10. In the 1930s, he watched Milwaukee Road streamlined Hiawathas pass near his home and rode his bicycle to the C&NW's lakefront depot in Milwaukee to see and photograph the 400's with his first camera, received at age 11. Railroad photography has always been an important part of Ralph's life.

Ralph graduated from high school in 1942, and with World War II in full swing, got a job at the Packard Motor Car Company in Milwaukee until his draft notice came. Drafted into the US Army in 1943, after basic training he was sent to North Africa and the Allied invasion of Italy.

There in 1944 at the Battle of Monte Cassino he lost his dominant lower left arm and hand to a German mortar shell. After returning home, recovery and discharge, Ralph attended the University of Wisconsin, graduating in 1950 with a degree in education.

He taught in Mellen, WI for three years and then moved to Merrill, WI, where he worked the remainder of his career as teacher and district audio-visual director, retiring in 1986. Ralph and late wife Norma have one daughter.

1950 saw Ralph's first HO gauge modeling with an Athearn F-Unit diesel (ironic to those who know how much he favors steam). He painted in C&NW colors after a visit to photograph one such unit ended with an invitation into the locomotive cab.

Ralph's first small HO layout accompanied him to Mellen and then Merrill. He joined the National Model Railroad Association in the mid-1950s and in 1960 was among the founding members of the Wisconsin Valley Model Railroad Club. Moving to a new home in 1962, Ralph began his current HO Scale Penokee, Grandview & Winnipeg (PG&W) in 1963.

Custom decals for this railroad were made for him by William Walthers. He continues operating and refining this railroad in his basement, alongside a lifetime collection of railroad artifacts.

Ralph was active in the WinnebagoLand Division of the NMRA, presenting clinics on operations and card order car forwarding. He attended NMRA national conventions from Montreal to Seattle. After initially not considering the NMRA Achievement Program, he was convinced by a friend to pursue it, which led to his receipt of Master Model Railroader (MMR) #191 in September 1992.

Ralph has also been active in the Soo Line Technical & Historical Society and the Chicago & North Western Historical Society.

Ever the teacher, Ralph has stood as an example for many fledgling model railroaders, and modeling excellence in spite of his disability. He is an expert in the use of clamps, jigs, fixtures, and specialized tools to assist in normalizing this handicap.

Many of his former students and modeling colleagues were on hand for Ralph's 100th birthday celebration in June 2024 at Merrill, WI.